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ABSTRACT

The number of older, non-traditional students in college settings has been increasing. These students are often women in need of special services. They return to school for a variety of reasons including intellectual challenge, self-improvement, or to train for a career. Colleges should offer a combination of academic, personal, and career counseling services. Re-entry women students are often highly motivated and do well. Adults have problems similar to other age groups including fears of poor skills, writing papers, and taking tests. Mothers becoming students may fear that they are neglecting their children. Mothers return to school sometimes in need of a skill which can be quickly marketed so they can support themselves and their children. Re-entry women students are racially and socially diverse including white, black, Hispanic, Native American, handicapped, poor, elderly, widowed, and divorced women. If special services cannot be provided in colleges to these women, regular counselors should be sensitive to their needs. (ABL)

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COUNSELING FOR THE RE-ENTRY WOMAN

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COUNSELING FOR THE RE-ENTRY WOMAN

The number of older college students has been increasing in recent years. More often, this group is largely women. These re-entry students have special needs and concerns, and therefore, may require special services to help smooth their way into school and to completion of a program.

Factors such as age, background, maturity level, life experiences and responsibilities make adult students significantly different from traditional post-high school students. Some older students may be displaced homemakers with little or no work experience, some have extensive volunteer experience, or they may have extensive experience in one type of work and wish to begin a new career. Some persons return to school for intellectual challenge alone, while others seek self-improvement or extended horizons. Most returning students, however, wish to train for work or career. Therefore, a combination of academic, personal and career counseling often makes a difference in successful transition back to school. Queensborough Community College has had an ongoing program in the Counseling Center which attempts to meet this need.

The Census Bureau reports that between 1975 and 1978 the numbers of women between 24 and 34 returning to school rose. Returning women often do well in their studies as motivation is high and a Carnegie Council study (1980) suggests this group of women can help to offset the decline in enrollment of the traditional 18-22 year old student.

The first problem for women is simply to understand the mechanics of returning to school, and to have some supportive help in overcoming institutional barriers. Counselors as well as strategic school personnel need to be sensitive to such students and be prepared to transmit positive feelings about the possibility of success at the institution.

Joan, a young woman in her early 30's, recently separated from her husband and having been a successful travel agent comes to a local community college pre-registration conference and expresses a desire to study elementary education. This had been her ambition since her high school years, but circumstances had kept her from pursuit of this goal. Continued contact that allowed for a clear definition of the steps needed to achieve her goal, support for the legitimacy of pursuing such a goal, and some personal counseling to raise her level of confidence led to not only enrollment in school, but to a role in the student body that was extremely gratifying to her. She became the president of the student government and due to her maturity and past business experience, was able to provide a mature role model in student affairs. This student's first contact with the college counselor was reassuring about returning to school as an older woman, was the impetus for her return to school, and for her continuing success.

Many women feel a fundamental insecurity about their ability to succeed. Schlossberg and Entine (1976) summarize data that confirms the notion that adults experience conflicts, hopes, dreams, and disappointments just like any other age group. Unrealistic fears about poor skills, recalling materials, writing papers and taking exams are all possible.

Many women have invested heavily in child rearing. The expert advice often "focuses exclusively on the child, with the welfare of the mother given little attention ... this intense concentration on what is good for the child and only the child, can make a mother feel constant anxiety and guilt over whether she is being a 'good enough' mother ...", Rivers et al, p. 21 (1979). When these women, who have seen themselves as fundamentally wives and/or mothers, return to school to pursue an independent activity, they express guilt over neglect of the earlier role.

Brandenberg's (1974) statement that many women are unable to assert themselves enough to make decisions and to deal with resistance from family and friends is particularly true for women with children. Many of these women have unique talents and strengths, and the awareness of such strengths can come about in re-entry counseling.

Many of these women can be seen in the two-year college career programs, often the more traditional programs such as nursing which allow for the nurturing role to continue. In addition, such careers provide fairly quick access to a profession that is in demand and will enable them to be self-supporting where necessary. Many of these women are separated or considering separation and urgently need to find work in which they can support children. Regardless of the reason for the marital problem, economic need is often pressing.

Sally a returning student, had been recently divorced and was receiving support through Aid to Dependent Children. The husband had disappeared and provided no child support. It was important for the Counselor to provide ongoing support while Sally struggled with the problems of two young children, lack of funds, and feelings of guilt that the school program required concentration and time which might have been spent on the children. The College Counselor not only supported her shift from home to school, but was helpful in interpreting that she was a responsible mother at the children's school. Very often a stereotype occurs in the minds of elementary school personnel that divorced homes are responsible for any problem that occurs in school. Intervention with the children's school led to a better understanding of the mother. In addition, a support group of other women nursing students was established in the Counseling Center where common problems seemed less overwhelming after discussion.

Mary, another nursing student, was experiencing extreme stress upon her return to school. She had separated from her husband after many years of abuse

and was receiving Aid to Dependent Children support. In anger, the ex-husband reported that he was giving her an additional $25 a week for the children, and as a result funds were cut off. In order to remain in school, she was forced to allow custody of the children to revert to the husband as she had no means of support. Guilt about her role as a mother as well as family disapproval caused depression and feelings of worthlessness to surface. Intensive work with the counselor enabled her to remain in school. Upon graduation she will be able to support the children and work out a more equal living arrangement for the children.

Many women move from a dependent position, either as a child in a family or an adult in a marriage to a new and independent identity awareness. Fears about giving up the dependent role and fears associated with added pressures and responsibilities abound. Painful self-doubt is a common theme. If a school does not have a special program for re-entry women, the regular Counselor must be aware of the particular problems facing this group.

Alice, a 50 year old minority woman came to the Counseling Center with acute depressive symptoms. She could not sleep or eat, and cried easily. She has returned to school after early successful job experiences and a later poor experience with the New York City Police Department. She is a Dean's list student, but feels that she will not be successful in her new chosen field, Data Processing. In addition, she is experiencing stress in the marriage, and feels herself a financial burden. Through ongoing sessions with the Counselor she was able to handle some of the problems, graduate from the program, and explore options in her life that led to a lifting of her depression.

It can safely be said that this growing group of re-entry women is extremely diverse, and not white middle class as previously assumed. Such

groups may now include Black, Hispanic, Native American, handicapped, economically disadvantaged, elderly, widows and divorced women.

Edna, a woman in her middle fifties returned to school as a part-time student following the death of her husband. Although she was employed as a full-time bookkeeper, her life seemed empty. She had been both depressed and fearful following her husband's death. Financial resources were limited and she would like to find a different job, but was afraid that her age was an impediment to a new career. Support and counseling was helpful during her early return to school, and continuing exploration of strengths and past experience led to enrollment in a university wide B.A. program that gave credit for work experience. Age discrimination is felt but must be counter-acted.

Although it might be advantageous to have a variety of special programs available, the budget and personnel limitations of most institutions make it impossible to provide such programs. Regular counseling services should be aware of the unique situations in our special populations so that they may be helpful to all women re-entering the institution.

The Women's Re-Entry project, sponsored by a grant from the Women's Educational Equity Act of the Department of Education (1980), gives suggestions for institutional support services. In essence, there must be a place on campus to which the women may be referred with certainty that their special needs will be understood. Contact with other older students and informal support groups are extremely helpful. Career and vocational materials geared to the needs of this group must be utilized. Special outreach materials should be developed and distributed throughout the community. Special workshops for community women will attract a diverse group and help them to assess what the institution can offer. Accurate financial aid information is essential. If the institution

wishes to capture this growing group of returning students, greater flexibility in scheduling, special programs, outreach and non-traditional pathways must be available.

At the same time, it is apparent that the existing counseling facilities can be effectively utilized to assist this growing population.

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